Book Reviews

Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies
Linda Adler-Kassner & Elizabeth Wardle (Eds.)
Boulder: UP of Colorado (2015)
Review by Courtney Stanton
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In the introduction to *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, Kathleen Blake Yancey acknowledges that a collection of disciplinary concepts could easily be seen as a sort of canon, one with 'an explicit emphasis on definition and the implication of dogma' (xix). Yet, the intention of this new work, helmed by editors Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, is not to codify but simply to understand and more meaningfully frame that which is still seemingly missing in composition scholarship: consensus about disciplinary content.

For those beyond the field, this admission might seem confusing. External stakeholders—administrators, other faculty, etc.—often assume that writing courses are devoid of content, with writing acting only as a medium for other subjects. Composition classes, through this lens, are meant to teach students *how to write* about other topics, not *about writing. Naming What We Know* responds to this misconception, knowing that a misunderstanding of writing courses as necessarily simple or conceptually empty contributes to a broader devaluing of the field itself. Adler-Kassner and Wardle, two long-time supporters of the writing studies movement in composition, acknowledge in their opening chapter that composition has long struggled to articulate its collective knowledge, particularly to those stakeholders beyond our writing programs who often have considerable influence over pedagogy. Indeed, even within the field itself there is not always agreement as to what the actual content of writing courses is, or should be. As Adler-Kassner and Wardle explain, this lack of disciplinary consensus has adversely affected the field, since despite the decades of research that have taught us more about how writing works, how best to teach it in our classrooms, etc., 'we continue to lose the battle over discussions of writing to stakeholders who have money, power, and influence but little related expertise' (7). To have the most meaningful influence, then, on not only our students but also our own work as teachers and scholars of writing, we need to more actively—and more explicitly—establish our disciplinary frame. This is a crucial step for composition, and *Naming* does a fine job of beginning a more clearly defined path forward for writing studies.

The first section of the book presents threshold concepts—defined in the preface by Ray Land as 'the conceptual and ontological shifts students must undertake to achieve capability'—found in composition, as a way to, as the title suggests, put a name to what we actually know (xiii). Adler-Kassner and Wardle expand on the definition of threshold concepts in their introductory chapter, laying the groundwork for the many who are likely unfamiliar, given their fledgling status in composition scholarship. The editors offer more than thirty concepts in this first section, conveniently organizing them into five overarching categories, such as 'Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity' and 'All Writers Have More to Learn.' Within these broader categories, authors explore specific concepts of composition which, their inclusion argues, are axiomatic to composition's identity. Each entry is typically no more than two pages long and offers an encyclopedic look at a specific sliver of disciplinary knowledge. Under 'Writing is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,' for instance, David R. Russell offers an entry titled 'Writing Mediates Activity,' in which he explains how writing 'comes between, intervenes in—the activity of people,' the differences in this regard between writing and other forms of communication, and how this concept can troublesome (26-7). The ability of Russell and others throughout this first section to capture these incredibly sticky subjects with such concision is indeed impressive. Many of them certainly warrant much greater development, but given the purposes of the book and the need to set forth as many ideas as is reasonable in this first collection, their brevity is understandable.

The larger second section of the book is devoted to exploring how these concepts and others yet to be explored can be used in practice, and Adler-Kassner and Wardle have clearly attempted to cast a wide net with their examples. They offer chapters on all of the major sites of composition—first-year writing, writing centers, WAC/WID, even doctoral programs—and they include discussions of some of the major

ideological concerns of composition scholarship, like assessment, learning outcomes, and professional development. This section of *Naming* is crucial, because it puts a practical face to the many abstracted concepts, and chapter authors consistently provide references back to specific concepts introduced earlier. In their chapter, for instance, Doug Downs and Liane Robertson offer an imagined framework for incorporating threshold concepts into a first-year writing course, breaking the course into four possible units and, for each unit, suggesting potential concept options and ways to weave them together. The chapters of this second section serve both a practical and what we might call a meta-practical purpose, in that they act to offset the theory-heavy first section as well as to satisfy composition's historical commitment to practice-oriented discussion.

Indeed, a primary impetus of this book is the lack of consensus at the level of our conceptual frame, and the establishment of this frame is necessarily slippery and complex. Adler-Kassner and Wardle remind us that 'There is a difference between naming and describing principles and practices that extend from the research base of a discipline. . . and stripping the complexity from those principles in order to distill them into convenient categories' (8). Their resistance to this distillation and their call for greater attention to these threshold concepts which are, by definition, abstract and disruptive could be misconstrued as an attempt to shift the field away from practical concerns. The second section is a satisfying response to such concerns, as Adler-Kassner and Wardle assert unequivocally that 'Naming threshold concepts. . . should not be a navel-gazing exercise.' Instead, they argue, 'it is a pressing prerequisite to being able to work more effectively with our various stakeholders' (84). The book will prove most helpful, certainly, to teachers and scholars of composition, not only for what it articulates but also because of its flexibility. The concepts in the first section are not offered linearly or in any sort of rigid order, so one can break them apart and easily adapt them to a particular pedagogical scenario. Many of the entries are also written in an easy, accessible style that would likely appeal to students, so while there is undoubtedly a great deal of complexity packed into the first section, much of it could be shared directly with students.

Overall, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* is an immense contribution to the disciplinary knowledge of composition. One might argue that it is not really offering all that much that is original, in that it begins from the position that we must compile what we *already* know. Yet, this may be the book's greatest strength, and what makes it so uniquely significant. Adler-Kassner and Wardle have looked out across the discipline and acknowledged the lack of consensus in its content; they recognize the immensity of this absence and, from this, have taken first steps toward a more stable disciplinary frame. Given that these are first steps, there are ways to improve upon their efforts, of course. The lack of empirical support is frustrating, though reasonable given the context. They recognize the need to test these ideas, as well as to add to the current list of threshold concepts. The editors, as well as various contributors, are wise to acknowledge the book's 'contingency' at various turns, knowing that their list is necessarily incomplete and will surely be enacted through many different forms yet to be seen. It would also be useful to include greater background on the status of threshold concepts—and writing studies more broadly—within composition. Neither has been accepted wholesale within composition pedagogy or scholarship, and in many cases they receive considerable resistance. Adler-Kassner and Wardle address this briefly, but there is certainly a great deal more to say. A chapter reviewing this resistance would not only more firmly establish the book's position in the disciplinary history but also allow for the opportunity to directly address some of the major counterarguments the book might inspire and, as such, further empower those teachers and scholars looking to embrace a writing studies approach.

Debates in the Digital Humanities
M.K Gold & L.F Klein (Eds.)
University of Minnesota Press (2016)
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My expectations of this book were that there would be a great of debate about the way in which Digital Humanities might differ from Digital Sciences and academic disciplines overall. This however this is woven into the arguments in the text rather than being treated as a subject by itself. One particular